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Press

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Getting Back at the Press

The press can be an uneasy tribe to live with—curious, demanding and persistent. But adversaries can be just as persistent and demanding, so that truces are never possible. Ronald Reagan long ago learned to control how he appears on TV and minimize encounters with the press. Now the Reagan people are mounting an offense to stop leaks to reporters.

How strange that the Administration should begin getting tough over the Pelton espionage trial. Here a trusted Government official is accused of selling some of the nation's most closely guarded secrets to the Soviets, and the CIA gets all upset about what additional secrets might be let out in trying him. The CIA considers whether NBC should be prosecuted for its reporting. Reagan puts pressure on the *Washington Post* with a personal phone call to Chairman Katharine Graham. The CIA warns trial reporters not to delve beyond the testimony. No journalist would willingly jeopardize the nation's security, but, the CIA argues, news organizations may not always be the best judge of that. Journalists reply that the CIA has a long history of minimizing its embarrassments and concealing its failures. Continued contention is the prospect.

The American press has also been under steady attack by the Soviet Union ever since the Chernobyl nuclear accident. This takes true totalitarian gall. In the first few days, when the Soviets were hiding the facts, many American papers carried the U.P.I. report of 2,000 deaths, from an anonymous source in Kiev, but scrupulously did not sensationalize what could not be verified. The one major exception was the *New York Post*, that cynical tabloid that continues to lose millions for its Australian-born publisher, Rupert Murdoch. The *Post* used half its front page for a black headline MASS GRAVE, adding

"15,000 reported buried in nuke disposal site." The flimsy authority cited was the obscure *Ukrainian Weekly* of New Jersey. A commentator waved a copy of the *Post*'s MASS GRAVE front page over Soviet television, and seems to have convinced many Russians of sensationalized American coverage.

Big Business also makes the American press its target in a how-to book by Herb Schmertz called *Good-bye to the Low Profile*. Schmertz is the public relations fellow who earns

praise for Mobil Oil's sponsorship of public television's *Masterpiece Theater* and mixed notices for Mobil's disputatious ads in newspapers and magazines. He believes in practicing contentiousness on the press. His advice is often shrewd: "If there's something you want to hide, but are required to disclose, put it in a press release . . . Most journalists find it hard to take seriously what you give them willingly." If your boss appears on *60 Minutes*, Schmertz says, he should be as wary of "Harry Reasonable" as of "Mike Ambush." He suggests that the scope of the interview—including what documents the boss may be confronted with—should be talked



Herb Schmertz: practicing contentiousness

out in advance. "When a TV journalist wants to interview me," Schmertz writes, "I generally assume the story he's working on is hostile to me or my company, or else he wants to use me to attack somebody else. When a print reporter calls, I make no such assumptions." Yet Mobil, in a feud with the *Wall Street Journal*, refuses to talk to *Journal* reporters, and has taken its ads out of the paper. Merely a tantrum, or wrong-headed behavior by a giant corporation?

When the Supreme Court gave the press libel protection to make public debate "uninhibited, robust and wide open," it must have foreseen that opponents would be equally robust.